

Greater Milan's foodscape: A neo-rural metropolis

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Chapter Author(s): Stefano Quaglia and Jean-Baptiste Geissler

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## Greater Milan's foodscape

### A neo-rural metropolis

Stefano Quaglia and Jean-Baptiste Geissler

Milan is internationally recognised as a tertiary city-hub, celebrated as the uncontested Italian capital of design and fashion and renowned for its financial and cultural services. Yet, this European metropolis is also a major agricultural centre, in both the Italian and the European context, as defined by agricultural land coverage and the number of farms. This mixed-use nature of the metropolitan region is not a new phenomenon. Since the Middle Ages, Milan has been characterised by a tradition of agricultural practices.

However, since the mid-1900s its urban/agricultural character has been affected by several dynamics. The most significant phenomena have been rural depopulation, as rural residents' migration towards industrial and tertiary urban activities, and the correlated rapid urbanisation. Both have caused degradation of Milan's peri-urban and rural landscape, with dire effects on natural resources, especially soil and water (Borasio and Prusicki 2014).

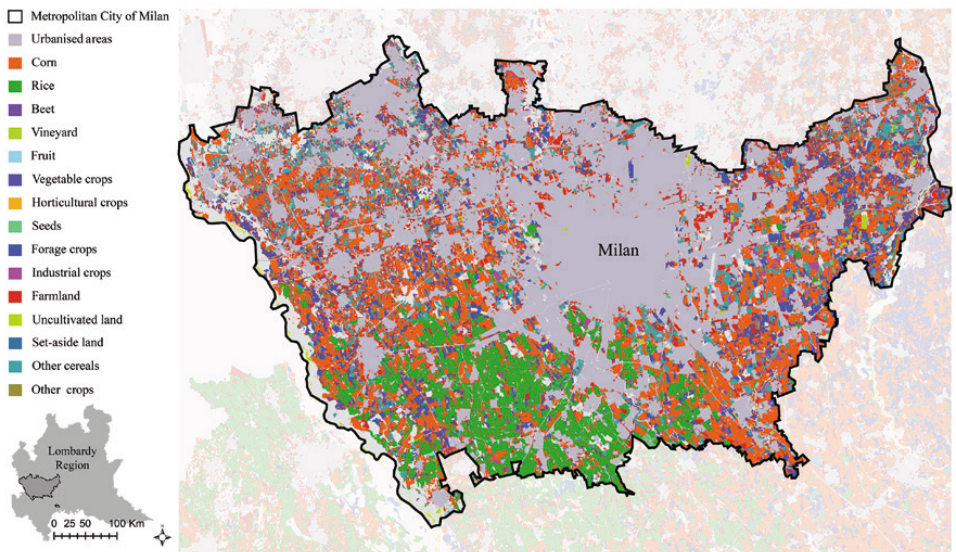
Milan and its metropolitan outskirts – with a growing population of over three million – are also facing other challenges such as urban sprawl, climate change, additional in-migration and natural resource depletion. All of these factors have contributed to the fragmentation of the agricultural landscape and to an impoverishment of metropolitan food quality and production facilities as well as ever-increasing tensions relating to social injustice and food poverty.

To address these issues, Milan has recently begun a process to improve the sustainability of its food system. Thanks to the proactive role of citizens and local authorities, Milan has moved to integrate the food system into the urban agenda, conferring on this topic a crucial importance in city planning and development.

This effort has been pursued to achieve a balance between the strong urbanisation pressure and the importance of preserving the ecosystem services (e.g. food production, soil and water regulation, urban cooling, air purification and recreation) provided by the green-agro infrastructure in the peri-urban interface.

Milan's vision translated into the implementation of many projects, policies and practices to achieve the city's neo-ruralisation strategy, with the twofold aim of protecting the urban and peri-urban rural spaces and enhancing the production of quality food. This vision was strengthened by both the recognition of the multi-functional role of agriculture and the engagement of a wide range of local stakeholders to assist in developing a shared urban–rural strategy.

This strategy proposes an interesting approach to planning and managing the Milan metropolitan rural system (Figure 14.1), which consists of 66 000 hectares of utilised prime agricultural land mainly producing cereals and industrial and forage crops (as shown in Table 14.1). This innovative approach was adopted in order to overcome the historical conflict between urban and rural areas, drawing inspiration from the utopian idea of *campagnes urbaines* introduced by Donadieu (2013), who advocated considering them as integrated spaces and not as conflicting territories.



**Figure 14.1** Milan metropolitan rural system – agricultural land use.  
(Source: Elaborated by Massimiliano Granceri from ERSAF data, 2012)

**Table 14.1** Metropolitan main crops production

Crops	Productive surface (ha)	Total harvested production (kg)	Average production (kg/ha)
<i>Cereals</i>			
Wheat	4686	283 500	116.02
Barley	2515	148 448	59.03
Oat	74	2640	35.68
Rye	235	8813	37.50
Triticale	1425	76 687	53.82
Rice	12 117	678 552	56.00
Corn	18 950	2 312 075	122.01
Sorghum	363	26 005	71.64
Other cereals	73	3474	47.59
Total cereals	40 438		
<i>Industrial crops</i>			
Soy	2750	84 165	30.61
Colza	490	13 354	27.25
Sunflower	5	108	21.60
Total	3245		
<i>Protein plants</i>			
Pea	181	4668	25.79
Other protein plants	14	189	13.50
Total	195		
<i>Tuber plants</i>			
Potato	13	4100	315.38
<i>Horticultural crops</i>			
Industrial tomato	100	59 221	592.21
Other horticultural crops	761		
Total	861		
<i>Forage crops</i>			
<i>1. Meadows</i>			
Silage	8300	4 840 980	583.25
Rye grass	2900	1 073 000	370.00
Other meadow crops	2590	1 036 000	400.00
Total	13 790		

**Table 14.1** (Continued)

Crops	Productive surface (ha)	Total harvested production (kg)	Average production (kg/ha)
<i>2. Temporary grassland</i>			
Polyphytic temporary grassland	2140	995 100	465.00
Alfalfa	1530	749 700	490.00
Other temporary grassland	130	60 450	465.00
Total	3800		
<i>3. Grassland</i>			
Permanent grassland	7680	3 801 200	494.95
Pasture	100	48 450	484.50
Total	7780		
<i>Wood crops</i>			
Vine	202	14 631	72.43
Apple tree	5	860	172.00
Pear tree	5	620	124.00
Other fruit	38	1458	38.37
Total	250		

Source: Open access data from Metropolitan City of Milan, 2014.

In this context, we outline how urban planning strategies of the food system were integrated into the Milan metropolitan area. We show the process by which this metropolis is developing a long-term strategy to improve sustainability, resilience and food security.

## 14.1. The neo-ruralisation of Milan

### 14.1.1. Regional approach – PASM

The linkage between urban development and food production in the Milan metropolitan area emerged in the 1970s. At that time, concerns were expressed about the environmental impacts of urbanisation on natural and rural spaces, especially those localised in the peri-urban interface of the city, and the gradual abandonment of agricultural lands.

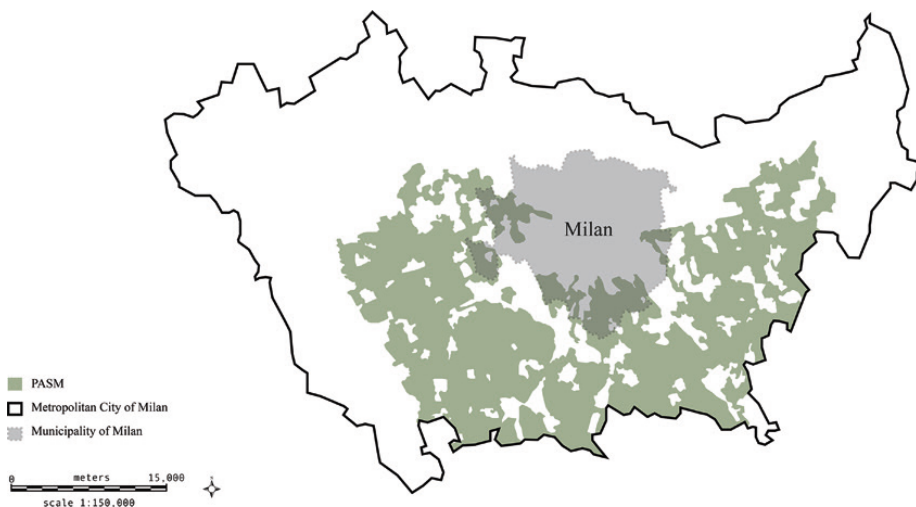
This mobilised a bottom-up effort to find a way to preserve the rural landscape of the city's fringes. This trend reached a turning point in the 1990s, when Parco Agricolo Sud di Milano (PASM – Agricultural Park of South Milan) was established with the aim of mitigating the effects of the rapid urbanisation in the peri-urban areas and supporting the production of local food (Magoni and Colucci 2017).

Lombardy Regional law n.24/1990, which established the PASM, defined the Province of Milan (now the Metropolitan City of Milan) as the governing authority of the park, with the responsibility to pursue the following objectives:

- landscape and environmental protection and recovery of green continuity between the city and the countryside;
- improvement of the ecological balance of the metropolitan area;
- protection and enhancement of agricultural and forestry activities;
- improvement of citizens' recreational and farming opportunities.<sup>1</sup>

The regional authority introduced a tool aiming to integrate these objectives and protect the environment through the valorisation of the multi-functional role of agriculture, thereby recreating the traditional synergy between Milan and its rural outskirts.

Today the PASM (Figure 14.2) is one of the main agricultural parks in Europe, extending over 47 000 hectares, including a 36 500 hectare



**Figure 14.2** Map of the PASM. (Source: Elaborated by Stefano Quaglia from open access data of the Metropolitan City of Milan, 2010)

utilised agricultural area (UAA), which covers a third of the Milan metropolitan area, encompassing 61 municipalities and 1400 farms and farm-related properties. Although most of the PASM consists of agricultural land, it also contains elements with high natural value and complex ecological functions, such as wooded and wet permanent areas, trees and hedges (albeit that in the past century there has been substantial degradation of these natural resources). Other characteristic elements of the park are the ancient and wide irrigation system, shaped by the Adda and Lambro Rivers and smaller waterways, artificial canals and karst springs, as well as historical abbeys, farmhouses and castles.

Notably, the productive nature of the PASM was to be maintained, for the goal was not to create peri-urban parks like those in Paris. Instead the focus was on the preservation of the physical and environmental characteristics of this territory and the creation of model agricultural production areas. For example, areas with high availability of water are characterised by intensive cultivation of cereals; in particular, rice and corn are typical products of the PASM. Areas with less water are allocated mainly to the alimentation of livestock, primarily for industrial dairy production. Other types of crops are grown but they represent marginal portions of the production (as showed in Table 14.2), implying the need to supply these food items from external sources, both Italian and international.

The PASM is managed by the Metropolitan City of Milan through the Piano Territoriale di Coordinamento (PTC – Territorial Coordination Plan) introduced in 2000 with the aim of defining land use within the park boundaries. The PTC identifies rules for the protection of natural and agricultural areas, as well as the cultural heritage and waterways, and for

**Table 14.2** Crops cultivated in the PASM

Crops	Hectares	Percentage of total
Corn	17 337	47
Rice	10 699	29
Grassland and permanent pasture	4034	11
Autumn–winter cereal crops	2018	6
Soybean	1830	5
Tree crops	465	1
Horticultural and floricultural crops	117	0
Total	36 500	100

*Source:* Elaborated from Migliorini and Scaltriti (2012).



the use of open spaces. The PTC sets the specific planning competencies of the governing authority responsible for the definition of implementation plans (sector plan, natural reserve and peri-urban park plans). However, as Vescovi (2014) observes, the initial lack of and then late adoption of an implementation plan can be one of the limiting factors in the integration of urban and rural development. Lack of implementation undermined the original multi-functional purpose of the PASM and limited its role to that of a passive urban policy tool for contrasting urbanisation pressures. It also is important to consider the threats to agricultural production. They derive from demographic growth, the urbanisation of peri-urban areas and the development of new infrastructures. For example, between 1999 and 2009 the PASM lost 1042 hectares of rural land (Centro di Ricerca sul Consumo di Suolo [CRCS] 2013). Moreover, reliance on monoculture has also contributed to the loss of agro-biodiversity. These dynamics are predicted to have heavy impacts on this territory, reducing its ability to fulfil local food demand from 15.93 per cent in 2011 to an estimated 12.89 per cent in 2020 (Province of Milan 2011).

#### 14.1.2. Place-based programmes

These features and dynamics of the PASM resulted in a complex territory where parks, wilderness, agricultural activities and urbanised areas coexist. A good illustration is the Muggiano enclave. Situated at the extreme west of Milan's municipal territory and cut off from the rest of the city by the ring road (*tangenziale*), it is an agricultural enclave with a quite important productive function. But it also hosts a park with recreational functions (fishing, boating), and elements essential to the biodiversity of the whole area (bodies of water, green corridors). This complexity is an opportunity for Milan, but it also carries considerable stakes in terms of governance, infrastructure development and development paths. Oddly, areas like Muggiano, with strong latent potential, are currently losing inhabitants and productive capacity. To keep going they will have to invent their own development path somewhere between production and conservation.

Because of both the substantial political inertia with respect to implementing adequate policies and the environmental risks for food production, in recent years various place-based programmes have been implemented in Milan's metropolitan area with the overall aim of enhancing landscape values and producing quality food.

These new efforts have focused on methods to improve the sustainability of local agricultural production and develop a new model,

alternative to the conventional one, through the integration of the food sovereignty approach (Calori 2009). This has been demonstrated in community-supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives to promote food education and the selling of local produce, as well as the diffusion of 'ethical consumerism' and new markets and short chain structures around Milan (Tricarico 2014).

## 14.2. Creation of the Milan Agricultural District

Among the many policies and projects introduced was the creation of the Distretto Agricolo Milanese (DAM – Milan Agricultural District) in 2011. A joint effort of the City of Milan and local farmers, the programme is a key component of the integration of urban planning and food systems in the neo-ruralisation of the city (see Figure 14.3).

The DAM is a non-profit association recognised as a consortium by the Lombardy Region and, indirectly, as a rural district by the European Commission.<sup>2</sup> The programme involves 31 farms covering a total of 1500 hectares in the Municipality of Milan. It represents an innovative model of territorial governance aiming to develop a territorially embedded system



**Figure 14.3** Distretto Agricolo Milanese. (Source: Parco delle Risaie (2011))

of agricultural production through the valorisation of local farms and the quality of landscape, protect common goods like water and soil and foster the distribution and commercialisation of local food production.

The DAM works as a coordinating body gathering together public and private stakeholders to strengthen urban–rural interactions. It is backed by a strategic plan (Piano del Distretto Rurale di Milano) approved in 2011. The strategic plan was developed in accord with the vision of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which is oriented towards the promotion of territorial ruralisation, and the goals defined by the European Strategy 2020 of raising the level of employment, reducing poverty and mitigating climate change's effects. The goals of the plan refer to the following key issues:

- *Production*. Protection of common goods, like water and soil; diversification of agricultural production, both to establish better relationships between local demand and supply and to improve the quality of the rural landscape; increased capacity to process products on site; improved accommodation capacity.
- *Marketing*. Promotion of local food production and direct sales through new distribution channels.
- *Territorial protection and safety*. Protection from micro and macro criminality, especially in terms of land abuse, and upgrading farms to the current norms.
- *Ecosystem and landscape services improvement*. Maintenance of green and blue infrastructure and requalification and valorisation of historical and natural elements (e.g. farmhouses, karst springs, canals and wooded areas) (Consorzio DAM 2011).

This plan therefore represents an innovative approach to the neo-ruralisation of the city, thanks to its vision being based on the pivotal role played by farmers. The local authorities are their partners. Agricultural areas are a strategic asset for the sustainable development of the metropolitan area.

The partnership between the DAM and the local authorities has been strengthened with the signing of the *Protocollo d'Intesa – Strategia per lo sviluppo rurale di Milano*<sup>3</sup> (Agreement Protocol – Strategy for the Rural Development of Milan) in May 2012. This agreement, developed from the vision of the DAM's strategic plan, may be considered the starting point of a pathway towards an urban–rural development strategy shared between public and private stakeholders in the metropolitan food system.

A leading project of the DAM is the Parco delle Risaie (Rice Park), an agricultural area of 650 hectares within the PASM's boundaries which was strongly exposed to the threat of urbanisation. Its recovery and valorisation began from the mobilisation of citizens and farmers, with the assistance of a non-profit association.

#### 14.2.1. Associazione Parco delle Risaie Onlus

In 2008, a bottom-up process to re-establish both the natural and agricultural features of the area and its socioeconomic value was begun. Its goals were to strengthen the linkages between urban and rural contexts through the direct involvement of local stakeholders and authorities.

The association's strategic vision was defined by a democratic decision-making process. Its implementation aims to improve citizens' knowledge and participation in the project, preserve the rural landscape and promote farming's multi-functionality, as well as foster the diffusion of rice production.

### 14.3. Framework Agreement for Territorial Development

The implementation of these projects in the metropolitan territory has triggered a debate between institutions and farmers, leading in 2013 to the Lombardy Region's promotion of the Accordo Quadro di Sviluppo Territoriale<sup>4</sup> (AQST – Framework Agreement for Territorial Development). This agreement created a new level of governance, called the 'Milan Urban Metropolis'. It was accompanied by an action plan addressing several macro-objectives, such as improvement of the irrigation system, landscape and environmental restoration, multi-functionality, valorisation of rural culture, and innovation in production, distribution and marketing.

Through the signing of AQST, three other rural districts located in the metropolitan area became involved in the process of neo-ruralisation: Distretto Agricolo della Valle Olona (DAVO), Distretto Neorurale delle Tre Acque di Milano (DiNaMo) and Distretto Rurale Riso e Rane (Table 14.3). The involvement of metropolitan districts is an important aspect of this agreement, for it both permits the extension of the neo-ruralisation strategy to a wider range of stakeholders and creates a network of actors able to work as a system where previously actors worked alone in pursuit of their own ends.

**Table 14.3** Accredited rural districts in the Metropolitan City of Milan

District name	District type	Lead organisation	Number of farms involved	Rural land covered (ha)
Distretto Agricolo Milanese (DAM)	Rural	Municipality of Milan	31	2000
Distretto Agricolo della Valle Olona (DAVO)	Rural–fluvial	Fiume Olona Consortium	29	1500
Distretto Neorurale delle Tre Acque di Milano	Rural	Metropolitan City of Milan	60	5500
Distretto Rurale Riso e Rane	Rural	–	61	3500

Source: Open access data from Metropolitan City of Milan, 2013.

Although these districts may share the same organisational structure, they are characterised by different ambitions. Actions taken by the DAM, the DiNaMo and the DAVO are directed more towards finding an innovative role for farms, responding to market changes in terms of redefining urban–rural synergies, and improving the multi-functionality of agriculture. Conversely, the Distretto Rurale Riso e Rane is mainly oriented towards industrial production, even if this maintains a strong linkage with the valorisation of rural landscape (Vescovi 2014).

The implementation of these place-based policies demonstrates a growing interest in the rural district model in the Milan metropolitan context.

The reasons such governance models are popular include their capacity to develop collaborative networks and to share urban–rural development strategy between local authorities, farms, NGOs, CSA and residents. Moreover, the active role played by the farmers is crucial to pursuing an alternative model of agricultural production; one mainly relating to metropolitan food demand and potentially able to ensure economic growth in the coming years.

## 14.4. Expo 2015 and local and international developments

The DAM has a key role in the re-ruralisation of the city by means of the rural districts. It has collaborated with the Municipality of Milan

on several projects relating to Expo 2015 (e.g. the Vie d'Acqua, a proposed project to the recover and valorise peri-urban landscape around Milan). This mega-event hosted by the City of Milan tackled the topic 'Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life!' and triggered many local and global initiatives around the theme of food. It was a further step towards the integration of food and urban systems. It also built bridges with existing initiatives within the territory. For instance, it is worth noticing that PASM was present in Expo, mainly through two pavilions (Slow Food and Cascina Triulza). Its presence took the form of film projections, animations for children, laboratories and debates.

More ambitiously, the food theme momentum created by Expo 2015 has been used by the municipality to elaborate important internal and external projects. In particular, the vision of the municipality now seeks to exploit the material and aesthetic resources unlocked by hosting the mega-event and has contributed to the development of its legacy plan with the aim of boosting the implementation of the re-ruralisation strategy.

That being so, beyond the urban physical transformations around the city, the main legacy of Expo 2015 is the definition of the Milan Food Policy 2015–20 and the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact.

#### 14.4.1. Milan Food Policy

At the local level, the authorities initiated the Milan Food Policy, which aims to better understand the city's food system, identifying problems and opportunities, consulting and mobilising stakeholders and translating this knowledge into concrete action.

The elaboration of the food policy started with the work of experts in gathering data on several aspects of Milan's food system. A working group organised their results around 10 themes: Governance, Education, Waste, Access, Well-Being, Environment, Agroecosystem, Production, Finance and Trade. This effort resulted in the publication of a document, *Le dieci questioni della Food Policy* (The Ten Questions of the Food Policy), that was widely distributed to inform and engage with both stakeholders and citizens. The document was used to support the following actions:

- In February 2015, the municipal council defined its priorities and objectives in the development of the Food Policy.

- In March 2015, the third sector was consulted at the occasion of a fringe event at Fa' la cosa giusta!, the largest Italian fair on sustainable lifestyles, organised every year in Milan.
- In April 2015, a dialogue was initiated with start-ups and small businesses in the food sector.
- In May 2015, to reach as many citizens as possible, public meetings were organised in each of the nine districts of Milan.
- In June 2015, large private firms from the food sectors were consulted.

The results of this process were wrapped up and discussed in a 'Town Meeting' open to the public, held in July 2015. The concrete outcome of this process was the adoption, by the Milan City Council in October 2015, of guidelines for the Food Policy 2015–20.<sup>5</sup> This document, the *linee guide*, established five priorities, all subdivided into detailed potential pathways for action:

- Guarantee healthy food and sufficient drinkable water for all.
- Promote the Food System's sustainability.
- Food education.
- Fight against waste.
- Support and promote scientific research in the agro-food sector.

At the end of the document, the authors also listed the tools that are to be developed in support of these guidelines and recommended actions. They recommended the creation of a Food Metropolitan Council, which would help mobilise and be accountable to all the relevant actors. The deliberations of such an institution should be backed by a strong monitoring system able to provide relevant information about the local food system.

The City of Milan has recently announced a first implementation project relating to this policy. In collaboration with the DAM and Milano Ristorazione, the company in charge of catering in Milan, the local authorities want the rice served in school canteens to come from short local supply chains.<sup>6</sup> This goal is a first step towards connecting local production, and especially that coming from PASM, with local consumption. The project also has a cultural and educative component, for rice is an important local product (see [Tables 14.1](#) and [14.2](#)) that is already strongly promoted in the PASM context with the Parco delle Risaie (see above).

#### 14.4.2. International development: the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact

The Milan Urban Food Policy Pact was conceived as an effort by the municipality to take advantage of the momentum created by Expo 2015 to put food-related issues on the agenda of cities worldwide. Signed by over 160 municipal and metropolitan authorities worldwide, it encourages them to engage with these issues and to spread good practice drawn from international examples. Current developments include setting up an international award to encourage cities to take concrete steps to implement the actions suggested by the pact. Technical assistance, including monitoring tools, will be supported by FAO's Food for the Cities Programme.

### 14.5. Conclusion

Milan has been confronted, in the last half-century, with challenges not uncommon to major European metropolises: rapid and spreading peri-urbanisation, increasing air pollution, climate change effects, growing internal demand, degradation of green and blue infrastructure and increasing complexity of food provision logistics.

The originality of the Milanese case has been its capacity, quite early on compared with similar cities (especially in Italy), to recognise food production and distribution as a significant urban issue. This local mobilisation around food-related themes has had concrete outcomes, chiefly the creation of the PASM and the DAM, as well as the promotion of educational and informational initiatives and projects to improve food access and reduce waste.

The PASM, despite its passive role as a mere barrier to urban sprawl, is a quite unique example of a voluntary action taken to preserve agricultural production capacity within a metropolitan territory (or its immediate proximity). Coupled with the ambitious institutional arrangement of the DAM, it helped to sustain a significant level of local food production, while encouraging bottom-up initiatives to preserve biodiversity preservation and strengthen urban–rural relationships.

The implementation of the DAM, and the other rural districts, is an important step towards the creation of a more democratic decision-making process to manage agricultural land sustainably and increase the resilience of the urban food system.



As ambitious and original as these initiatives may have been, they have not been without flaws. Indeed, to articulate environmental protection priorities in urban development policies, while paying special attention to local food production, appears to be a critical challenge for Milan. It requires a clear and democratic governance structure, the availability of economic resources and a long-term strategy for the implementation of shared objectives. The PASM's management of peri-urban spaces in recent times appears to have failed to take these factors fully into account. In spite of its successes in preserving this territory's agricultural capacity, it has arguably not been able to propose adequate policy for developing a strategy to integrate interacting factors such as urban agriculture, land use management and food security.

That experience, however, reinforced by the recent place-based initiatives in the Milan context, can be considered a positive stepping stone in the process towards enhancing Milan's food system, on both municipal and regional scale. This has been especially significant in the recent period in which the city has been taking advantage of the momentum created by Expo 2015, which has brought financial resources, political will and media attention. The local authorities therefore engaged in a process to define an overarching Food Policy.

With the collaboration of experts, a large consultation was started, which resulted in the adoption of detailed guidelines by the municipal council. It is too early to assess the concrete results of this process, but it does have the potential to improve the metropolitan food system, especially in terms of sustainability and resilience. Even the beginning of its implementation can be considered progress. Beyond the institutional initiatives that have progressively been developed to translate words into concrete projects, the debates about Milan's food system have arguably contributed to changing individual and business practices. As far as the latter is concerned, a noteworthy initiative has been taken by the Esselunga supermarkets, 49 of which started selling locally produced rice (under the DAM brand) in April 2015.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

1. Gazzetta Ufficiale, Lombardy Region Law n. 24/1990, 'Istituzione del parco regionale di cintura metropolitana Parco Agricolo Sud Milano', last modified January 2016. <http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/regioni/caricaDettaglioAtto/originario?atto.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=1990-12-29&atto.codiceRedazionale=090R1242>
2. The European Commission, through Decision C (2008) 7843 of 10 December, has consented to the granting of state aid to implement the Rural District Contracts.

3. Protocollo d'Intesa – Strategia per lo sviluppo rurale di Milano, last modified February 2016. <http://www.agricity.it/wp-content/uploads/Politiche/Protocollo-firmato.pdf>
4. AQST Milano Metropoli Rurale, last modified February 2016. [http://lombardia.rurbance.eu/media/activity/AQST/TESTO\\_ACCORDO\\_AQST\\_MMR\\_DEF.pdf](http://lombardia.rurbance.eu/media/activity/AQST/TESTO_ACCORDO_AQST_MMR_DEF.pdf)
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